

**ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT DECISION NOTICE**  
**for the**  
**Keogh Ranch Conservation Easement Addition**  
**Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks**  
**Region 3, Bozeman**  
**June 30, 2016**

**Preface**

In 1996, the Keogh Ranch was put into a conservation easement with Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks (FWP). At the time there was a 41-acre parcel within the ranch boundaries that was owned by the BLM and therefore left unencumbered by the easement. The in-holding is now in the possession of the Fitzgerald family who also owns the land encumbered by the FWP conservation easement. The parcel is in a prime residential development location with residential subdivision occurring less than two miles away at the southern boundary of the conservation easement. Because the in-holding is located in the middle of the conservation easement, the potential disturbance from residential development is substantial.

The Keogh Conservation Easement is located in the intermountain valley between the Boulder Mountains to the west and the Bull Mountains to the east. It is a working cattle and hay ranch that also provides important wildlife habitat. The property extends from the valley floor to the foothills of the Boulder and Bull Mountains. The land is comprised of native shrub grassland habitats intersected by Little Whitetail Creek and associated riparian habitat. The property supports breeding mountain plovers and the western-most known black-tailed prairie dog colony in Montana. It provides year-round range for mule deer and antelope as well as fall and winter range for elk and is an important link between the two mountain ranges. The ranch is enrolled in Block Management and provides hunting access for an average of 400 hunters annually. Species that can be hunted include elk, mule deer, antelope, mountain lion, and upland game birds. In addition, they allow public fishing access to their reservoir. Conservation values and recreation opportunities could be impacted if this in-holding were developed, sold, subdivided, or habitat lost through conversion.

The objective of purchasing a conservation easement on this 41-acre in-holding is to ensure the long-term protection of the wildlife and recreational values of this property and the adjacent 7,106 acres of the existing Keogh Ranch conservation easement, all while maintaining a viable family agricultural operation.

**Proposed Action**

Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife, and Parks (FWP) proposes to purchase a conservation easement on a 41-acre in-holding that lies in the middle of the existing Keogh Conservation Easement property (7,106 encumbered acres) located 15 miles north of Whitehall, MT. The in-holding used to be owned by the BLM but is now in the possession of the Fitzgerald family who also owns the land encumbered by the FWP conservation easement. The cost of the easement is \$46,400. The Treasure State Chapter of the Mule Deer Foundation (Butte, MT) has committed to contribute \$10,000 toward the purchase. The balance of costs would be paid for through FWP's Habitat Montana Program. The in-holding would be encumbered with the same terms as the surrounding easement and managed under the same management plan.

**Public Process and Comments**

FWP is required by the Montana Environmental Policy Act (MEPA) to assess potential impacts of a proposed action to the human and physical environment. In compliance with MEPA, an Environmental Assessment (EA) was completed for the proposed project by FWP and released for public comment on May 26, 2016.

Public comments on the proposed action were taken for 30 days (through June 24, 2016). Legal notices were printed in the *Montana Standard* (Butte) and the *Whitehall Ledger*. The EA was also posted on the FWP webpage: <http://fwp.mt.gov/publicnotices/>.

This project has been discussed with the Jefferson Valley Sportsmen Association, and copies of the EA were sent to adjacent landowners and several other interested parties. Three comments were received, all in support of the proposed action.

### **Final Environmental Assessment**

The Draft Environmental Assessment, together with this Decision Notice, will serve as the final document for this proposal.

### **Decision**

Based on the Environmental Assessment and public comment, it is my decision to approve the proposed action to purchase a conservation easement on a 41-acre in-holding that lies in the middle of the existing Keogh Conservation Easement property, pending FWP Commission approval.

I find there to be no significant impacts on the human and physical environments associated with this project. Therefore, I conclude that the Environmental Assessment is the appropriate level of analysis, and that an Environmental Impact Statement is not required.



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Sam B. Sheppard  
Region 3 Supervisor  
Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks

5/30/2016

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Date